

## ***FISH & WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET***

**Meeting Date:** May 22, 2014

**Agenda Item:** 2014 Fall Upland Game Bird Quotas and Limits

**Division:** Wildlife

**Action Needed:** Proposed

**Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation:** 30 minutes

### **Background**

Upland game bird season dates for 2014 were approved in February. Other season elements include bag and possession limits, and permit quotas for turkeys. Adaptive Harvest Management for sage grouse annually assesses populations and bag limits. AHM within the final Management Plan and Conservation Strategies for Sage Grouse recommends a conservative two-bird bag limit if average lek counts are below the long-term average of about 30 males/lek on nearly 90 pre-selected leks. If the average count exceeds the LTA, then AHM recommends a standard four-bird bag limit. The sage grouse plan prescribes a season closure based on average lek counts at least 45% below LTA over three-years. Heightened public awareness of sage grouse, and potential habitat impacts from energy development, resulted in the Commission adopting a conservative two-bird bag limit in 2007, a year of above-average lek counts (33.6 males/lek). The two-bird bag limit was maintained from 2008-12 with annual survey averages of 22.9, 23.3, 20.5, 19.2 and 19.1 males/lek or 24-34% below LTA.

Continuing the downward trend from the recent high in 2009 (23.3), the 2013 lek average was 14.9 males/lek, 48% below the LTA. In response to population concerns and the potential for listing, the conservative two-bird bag limit was maintained in 2013 and the Commission adopted three distinct management zones for sage grouse in February. These zones allow for management at a scale finer than statewide.

While final 2014 lek counts will not be available for the May Commission meeting, preliminary indications suggest no improvement and potentially additional decline across all three management zones. With the downward trend in lek counts expected to continue with a second consecutive year at or below 45% below the LTA, FWP proposes to close the sage grouse season in 2014. Future lek counts above the 45% closure criteria but below the LTA for three consecutive years would prompt a proposal to reopen the season as would a single year with lek counts above the LTA. In both instances, the closure criteria would no longer be met. Based on the static nature of upland bird bag and possession limits as supported by biology and management history, no other changes are proposed for other upland game bird bag, possession limits and permit quotas. This includes fall turkey permits.

### **Public Involvement Process & Results**

If approved, public comment on the proposal will run through 5 p.m., Monday, June 23.

### **Alternatives and Analysis**

This proposal is based upon field observations and is consistent with the Management Plan and Conservation Strategies for Sage Grouse in Montana, which also would also guide any proposal to re-open the season. Population status and species biology don't support changes for other species at this time.

### **Agency Recommendation & Rationale**

FWP recommends adopting the proposed sage grouse closure and maintaining 2013 bag and possession limits and permit quotas for all other upland game birds, consistent with known biology, management history and survey efforts to date. Season dates were previously set by the Commission in February 2014.

### **Proposed Motion**

I move to approve for public comment the proposed 2014 sage grouse season closure and other upland game bird bag and possession limits and permit quotas as presented by FWP.